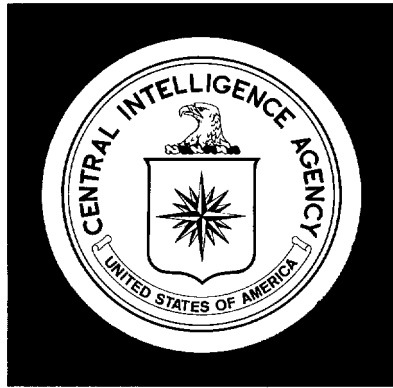


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11 September 1973

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11 September 1973

Central Intelligence Bulletin

CONTENTS

LAOS: Prospects for early signing of peace proto-
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Approved For Release 2004/01/15 : CIA-RDP79T00975A025200080002-2

Approved For Release 2004/01/15 : CIA-RDP79T00975A025200080002-2

LAOS: PROSPECTS FOR AN EARLY SIGNING OF THE DRAFT PEACE PROTOCOL HAVE IMPROVED.

PRIME MINISTER SOUVANNA PHOUMA HAS SCHEDULED A CABINET MEETING FOR TODAY AT WHICH HE INTENDS TO PRESS FOR APPROVAL TO SIGN THE AGREEMENT WITH THE COMMUNISTS ON 14 SEPTEMBER. SOUVANNA'S CHANCES OF GAINING APPROVAL APPEAR GOOD. FINANCE MINISTER SISOUK, WHO PREVIOUSLY HAD SOUGHT ADDITIONAL CONCESSIONS FROM THE COMMUNISTS, YESTERDAY DROPPED HIS OBJECTIONS TO THE PROTOCOL, AND TRANSPORTATION MINISTER NGON SANANIKONE NOW SAYS HE WILL ALSO SUPPORT THE PRIME MINISTER.

RIGHTIST OPPOSITION HAS WANED BECAUSE OF SOUVANNA'S ADROIT MANEUVERING IN THE PAST SEVERAL DAYS. WITH AN ASSIST FROM THE SOVIET AMBASSADOR IN VIENTIANE, SOUVANNA HAS ARRANGED TWO MEETINGS BETWEEN LAO ARMY GENERALS AND PATHET LAO REPRESENTATIVES TO DISCUSS CONTROVERSIAL POINTS OF THE MILITARY PORTION OF THE PROTOCOL. ALTHOUGH THE MEETINGS PRODUCED NO SUBSTANTIVE COMMUNIST CONCESSIONS, THEY SEEM TO HAVE ALLAYED THE GENERALS' APPREHENSIONS ABOUT COMMUNIST INTERPRETATIONS OF THE AGREEMENT. ONE OF SOUVANNA'S MOST VOCAL MILITARY CRITICS, LAO ARMY DEPUTY COMMANDER IN CHIEF GENERAL KOUPRASITH, AND SEVERAL OTHER INFLUENTIAL OFFICERS HAVE NOW PLEDGED THEIR SUPPORT TO THE PRIME MINISTER. FINANCE MINISTER SISOUK CITED THIS FRESH MILITARY SUPPORT AS THE REASON FOR HIS SWITCH.

DURING THE COURSE OF SEVEN MONTHS OF TURBULENT NEGOTIATIONS, SOUVANNA HAS BEEN CLOSE TO SIGNING THE FINAL AGREEMENT SEVERAL TIMES, ONLY TO HAVE THINGS BREAK DOWN AT THE LAST MOMENT. THIS COULD HAPPEN AGAIN, ALTHOUGH THE ODDS THAT HE WILL BE SUCCESSFUL SEEM BETTER THIS TIME.

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11 Sep 73

Central Intelligence Bulletin

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Next 4 Page(s) In Document Exempt

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25X1

Approved For Release 2004/01/15 : CIA-RDP79T00975A025200080002-2

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